



## CASE STUDY

# Bulgarian Courts Go On the Record

**The new audio recording system contributes to courts' efficiency and transparency.**



Photo: USAID

Courtroom audio recording equipment is installed in the eastern Bulgarian city of Shumen.

*“The public is informed about the verbatim recording at the beginning of a hearing. They know that they will receive a fair trial and court procedural rules will be followed and can be verified through the recording system.”*

—Vratsa District Court Chair  
Tatiana Alexandrova

### Challenge

In the Bulgarian court system, the official record of the testimony and motions during a trial (known as the “protocol”) consists of notes taken by a court secretary or summaries of testimony dictated by the judge. This process produces inconsistent and sometimes inaccurate records. Contrary to practice in the United States and many European countries, the Bulgarian civil and criminal procedure codes do not require a verbatim transcription of court proceedings.

### Initiative

A study funded by USAID endorsed the use of audio recording as a cost-effective system for the Bulgarian courts to facilitate drafting more accurate protocols. In 2004, USAID piloted a personal computer digital audio recording system in two Bulgarian courtrooms. In 2005 and 2006, the USAID Judicial Strengthening Initiative expanded the recording system to six additional courtrooms in Bulgaria.

Special multi-channel software designed specifically for courtroom recording allows each speaker to be heard and recorded separately. The software compresses the size of the audio files, uses different formats compatible with Microsoft Word, and allows notes to be inserted during the proceeding to identify exhibits or to index witness testimony.

### Result

The system caught on quickly and is now in demand by other courts. Judges of the pilot courts report that the system provides a more complete, accurate and transparent record of court proceedings, and even improves the behavior of participants in court cases, who know that their statements are recorded.

Accurate and reviewable witness statements enable judges to resolve cases more quickly. The ability of judges, court staff, and attorneys to verify the accuracy and completeness of the protocols also protects litigants' rights. The number of complaints and requests for modification of protocols has dropped drastically, a sign of increased public confidence in the transparency of the court process.